

INTERTEXTUAL TRIPS: TEACHING THE ESSAY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS

An essay. . .is a fiction
Cynthia Ozick

NANCY KLINE

The serious play of the professional writer in his or her page comes as an illumination to the apprentice writer. Especially in expository prose. Most college freshmen are acquainted with the notion of *Art as play*; they know *Creative Writing* is for fun and short stories are interesting.

But essays.

An essay is serious; it has to have a point. How can a point be interesting? You have to know what you think before you begin (too many college freshmen have been taught). And this problem is complicated by the fact that, if you do know what you think, you can't just come right out and say it in your first paragraph because then how will you fill up the page requirement? Should you succeed in starting the thing, you must develop your argument logically (*argument? logically?!), you need transitions between paragraphs, you can't say "I," and, if you quote anybody else, you have to give proper documentation. What a downer.*

What a delight to consider the essay from a different angle, as a fiction, a rhetorical game: playful, exploratory — a deeply

interesting experiment — which it, like all art, is. No matter how serious its purposes.

In my composition classes during the past few years, I have read a number of professional essays with my students to demonstrate this, in the belief, first of all, that to leave out what Roland Barthes calls the pleasure of the text is to read incompletely — even inaccurately — and you've got to read well before you can write well; secondly, that if apprentice writers are encouraged to see and feel the essayist's playfulness in constructing the text, and if they are then encouraged to approach their own page as an experimental, playful space, wherein questions, problems, provisional answers may be grappled with, pleasurably, then their own essays will be vivified and enriched, and their own as yet unarticulated thinking will become much more readily available to them and, subsequently, to their reader.

It's up to the individual instructor to choose which essays he or she will read with students, to these ends. Any well-written text will do, no matter how somber or frivolous its subject and overall tone may be. But what I would like to discuss here, in some detail, is the reading of three particular texts I frequently teach to beginning writers, each text extremely different from the other two and rich with pedagogical possibilities.

The first, Joan Didion's "Why I Write," is a personal essay whose subject is obvious from its title. The second, John Berryman's "The Open Boat," is a detailed literary analysis of a short story by Stephen Crane. And the third, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," is an example of impassioned argument and persuasion. I think it is fruitful to talk about these three essays in conjunction with one another not only because they are so well-written and because each sets out to do a different thing from the other two, but also because each of them is clearly an essay and at the same time something else: Didion's "Why I Write" is in fact a talk she delivered at Berkeley; Berryman's essay is an *explication de texte* and a quirky conversation with a fellow writer, long since dead, for whom Berryman nonetheless invents dialogue in the course of the explication; King's text is a letter, but a letter composed by a preacher. Each of these essays, then, contains a distinctly oral element. Each is a kind of dialogue.

And this is the other thing I want to teach my students: the essay, first as rhetorical game, and, second, as dialogue. Or, rather,

as a series of dialogues: between the writer and herself (or himself), between the writer and the reader, and between the text of the essay and the text it is commenting on, whether that other text be written or lived, a fiction, a nonfiction, or the world.

The text is always married to someone, to paraphrase the French poet Rene Char. The fact is that the text is usually a talky polygamist.

I find that once students have begun to see how intensely and how idiosyncratically professional writers enter into the multiple dialogues of the essay, then students themselves can begin to engage in the conversation, in the game. Students know that conversation is not a dead thing lying on a page that has nothing to do with them. It is not a stone tablet, fallen —intact, entire — out of the sky. It is a dynamic exchange of ideas and feelings between living creatures. It's fun. Once we have defined the essay as dialogue, as "fiction," in Cynthia Ozick's understanding of that term ("A fiction, by definition, is that which is made up in response to an excited imagination"[xi]), the essay becomes an object students can begin to give their own shape to, an exchange they can imagine participating in, playing at. If we encourage them to risk themselves, they can begin to experiment in their own pages with their side of the dialogue, with different levels of diction, rhetorical tropes, patterns and structures taken from the text or subject they are discussing, whatever verbal toys they find appealing.

The first step is to give ear to the voice of the professional essayist, to read the professional essay in class with passionate attention.

Let us listen to Joan Didion.

Form mirrors content to a dazzling degree in her "Why I Write." When the author speaks of writing as an aggressive act, she does so aggressively, in short bursts of prose which resemble bullets. She begins:

Of course I stole the title for this talk, from George Orwell.
One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words:
Why I Write. There you have three short unambiguous words
that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I

In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. (19—author's emphasis)

Didion begins with robbery — illegal, aggressive — and moves on to warfare, peppering her essay with military metaphors (“Like many writers I have only this one ‘subject,’ this one ‘area’: the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. . . . I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word ‘intellectual’ I reach for my gun. . . .” [18], and so forth).

But gradually the definition of the writer as aggressor, as invading force, fades into a portrait of the artist as a young woman, an undergraduate at Berkeley, before she knew who (or what) she was. In those days she saw herself, we are told, not as an aggressor but as an illegal alien, an academic wetback in someone else's country, desperately trying “to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for [herself] a mind that could deal with the abstract” (18). Abstract ideas are foreign to her make-up. We note with pleasure that when she speaks of them she does so in concrete images, and she uses the felicitous verb “to forge,” which implies art, craft — and duplicity. This last meaning becomes quite explicit a page later, when she remarks: “I was traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers” (19). We see that the young writer-to-be needs to be duplicitous in the university because she lacks the capacity for abstraction. Yet we know that it is precisely this lack—her incapacity for residing comfortably in the world of ideas, her hopeless fascination with the concrete, with what other people (all those foreign natives) think of as the “peripheral,” which is to her central — it is precisely *this* that makes her a writer:

I can no longer tell you whether Milton put the sun or the earth at the center of his universe in *Paradise Lost*, the central question of at least one century and a topic about which I wrote 10,000 words that summer, but I can still recall the exact rancidity of the butter in the City of San Francisco's dining car, and the way the tinted windows on the Greyhound bus cast the oil refineries around Carquinez Straits into a grayed and obscurely sinister light. In short my attention was

always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch. . .(19)

From metaphor (forged papers, shady border crossings, problematic borders) Didion has traveled into a concrete evocation of the peripheral-which-isn't-peripheral, into that physical realm, the realm of the senses, which is the only world the fiction writer can legitimately inhabit. She has demonstrated — by doing it — that she must always return there. And she has taken us with her, the vehicle for transporting us: the Greyhound bus she used to ride (we too look through its tinted windows), the City of San Francisco's dining car (like her, we know the butter is rancid).

But Didion does not keep us in the unmetaphorical for long. Her evocation of literal trips in literal buses soon moves on to a discussion of the creative trips that are her novels. Writing is, for her, exploration — of that foreign territory that is the self. Writing begins with pictures in the mind, images that she cannot decipher. It is imaginative travel into places she has never been before, and cannot get to any other way: "Had I been blessed with even limited access to my own mind there would have been no reason to write. I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means" (20). To reinforce the notion of writing as exploration that underlies this whole essay, the novels she specifically chooses to focus on turn out to take place in foreign settings, whether they be Las Vegas or Latin America.

"Why I Write" ends in an airport, a fictional airport in an invented Latin American country, inhabited by a fictional "I." Didion has been discussing how she stumbled on this "I" in the course of composing her novel *The Book of Common Prayer*. Here is the last paragraph of her essay on writing:

This 'I' was the voice of no author in my house. This 'I' was someone who not only knew why Charlotte went to the airport but also knew someone called 'Victor.' Who was Victor? Who was this narrator? Why was this narrator telling me this story? Let me tell you one thing about why writers write: had I known the answer to any of these questions I would never have needed to write a novel. (25)

We can see how far we've traveled in the course of this brief essay: the aggressive writerly "I I I" of the opening paragraph, who threatens to invade the reader's privacy, has been replaced

here by the narratorial “I,” whose mystery and power efface the writer herself, invade her territory, bring her to her knees. We see another thing as well in these concluding lines: a dynamic depiction of the dialogues that are inherent in any essay. Here is Didion the writer being told a story by her text, by the narrator in her text; and here is Didion the essayist telling her reader a story, a different one — the story of how she is being told a story.

Students come through this essay and out the other side changed, imposed upon, some of them entertained, some of them profoundly irritated. The latter are wont to point out that the author is even more duplicitous than she admits. She claims she can’t think, they say, but what’s she doing here? She puts down intellectuals and their abstractions, but isn’t this essay an example of abstract thought? Participants in the ensuing dialogue can get quite aggressive, much to the instructor’s delight.

Whatever their emotional reaction to the text, students experience vividly in its pages the playfulness and the exploratory nature of another writer’s prose. They see that even though Didion has been discussing the writing, specifically, of *fiction*, her expository text itself so glimmers with fictional techniques and so frequently reads like a short story that it is clear what she says about fiction applies equally to nonfiction. And they begin to suspect that their own writing might be exploration, and might take the form of play. This is a suspicion to be nurtured by instructors and tested out, preferably at once, by their students.

But “Why I Write” is a personal essay, a narrative, and, as any composition instructor knows, the personal essay seems to students less forbidding in the first place, more easily written than a critical essay (whether or not this is so remains to be seen). Yet the critical essay, whose aim is to analyze someone else’s text and to respond to it in writing, is the kind of paper students will be asked to write throughout their university careers. And here we find ourselves faced with the perennial question raised in expository writing classes: how do we move students from the personal essay to the critical paper?

I think a close reading, like the one we’ve just done, of other people’s texts can serve as a first step, a preliminary model. But how to proceed to a writing of that reading?

My tentative answer is to look at John Berryman’s essay on “The Open Boat” in conjunction with “Why I Write,” and to discuss

the two essays with my students in the same class period. Berryman's essay, like Didion's, is exploratory and questioning; its voice is just as commanding and particular as the voice in "Why I Write." Its subject, however, is Stephen Crane's text, and the trip it takes us on is a *reading* of that text. What interests me here, in addition to questions of voice and the author's experimental stance, is the relationship between the shape, form, proportion and organization of the analytical essay and these same elements in the short story it is analyzing. Whose title, I might point out, it adopts as its own: we are dealing with not one but two Open Boats.

If we go aboard with Berryman, we are instantly struck by the way in which the poet's voice and viewpoint impose themselves, exemplifying Didion's statement that writing is aggression. Before we've reached the end of his first page, he has set up a straw man and knocked him down (see below); put words into his reader's mind and mouth ("You may say, 'But the story begins with this sentence!' " [177]); and gone so far as to invent a rejoinder by Stephen Crane himself (" 'Completely wrong,' Crane is saying. 'You know nothing about the matter' " [177-178]). My students are incensed at Berryman's *chutzpah*. How can he *do* that?! they say, recognizing even as they object that they have been dragooned into participating in the dialogue and that the poet has made us feel just how much Crane lives, still, in his writing.

The straw man Berryman sets up is a hapless academic critic who has just published an article in an academic journal which attempts to "discredit" Crane's short story by demonstrating that it couldn't possibly be "a full and veracious account" (177) of the actual experience on which it is based. What is the relationship between truth and art? asks Berryman. His answer, in the third paragraph of his essay: "Imaginative art *takes off from* reality, becoming something else" (177). He then goes on to read Crane's fiction in such a way as to show us what that something else is—namely, a metaphor which exalts the human ability to make meaning.

And this is the drama of Berryman's own text: the making of meaning. His essay is much shorter than Crane's story—only one-third as long—but its detail and density, the amount of attention it lavishes on Crane's elliptical, spare prose makes it seem

longer. Berryman takes his time (and space) reading. He devotes the entire first page of his eight page text to a discussion of the story's title and subtitle ("The Open Boat"/"A Tale Intended to be after the Fact: Being the Experience of Four Men from the Sunk Steamer *Commodore*"); his entire second page consists of a reading of its first sentence ("None of them knew the color of the sky"); and his next three pages take us only as far as the bottom of Crane's first page — a fact Berryman himself brings to our notice in his paragraph on the wounded captain, where he remarks that "the quality of [the captain's] reflection and memory . . . is conveyed by Crane in language which has none of the irony that has characterized the opening page down to this point" (180). We have read more than half of Berryman's essay when we get to this observation. *Wait just a minute!* we say. Do you mean to tell me we're still on Crane's *opening page*? And we realized that as of this moment the commentary is five times longer than the text it is commenting on.

But this situation cannot last, not if the commentator and his reader are to make it through the ordeal: Crane's four shipwrecked men spend nineteen pages trying desperately to row their boat ashore . . . On page 6 of his essay, therefore, Berryman breaks his text with a white space, and changes tactics. He leaves "the complexities of tone" (181) he has been scrutinizing and, abandoning a line explication, he draws back to comment on the overall form of "The Open Boat": "The ordeal dramatized in the story has three parts . . . [which] we may see as three waves. Each gathers, swells, breaks, and is followed by another, until the final word of the story brings the movements to a conclusion" (181). The poet's last few pages are then devoted to a thematic analysis of Crane's three "waves." (And let me point out here, parenthetically, that Berryman's own essay is divided [by means of white spaces] into three parts, a fact which would seem to reflect the tripartite organization he attributes to Crane.) It is not lost on students that Berryman has invented a metaphor here to characterize the structure and movement of the story he's examining, and that his metaphor — three waves — was suggested not simply by the form but also by the subject matter of the story itself. This often comes as a new idea to students, this kind of intertextual play, and it is obviously applicable to their own critical essays on literary texts.

Thus I suggest to them, at this point in our discussion, that if they are writing about Philip Roth's "The Conversation of the Jews" — a story whose 13-year-old protagonist dashes up to the roof of his synagogue, locks himself there, and briefly becomes a modern-day prophet, surveying the cosmos, the failing light of a late November afternoon, his motley crew of disciples in the street below — students may be able to use in their own analysis the vocabulary of belief and disbelief, metaphors of light and darkness or of rising and falling, contrasting levels of diction that will reflect the contrasting levels of diction in the story itself. If they are analyzing Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," whose central object is a quilt, they may find themselves talking about the fabric of the story, the interweaving of its separate pieces, the author's patchwork technique. Of course their first such expeditions into rhetorical play may be clumsy. We must expect as much and grant them license to overdo, since it is only by experimenting that they will find proper balance and begin to articulate a graceful prose style of their own.

But let us return to Berryman. It is not simply the critic's adaptation of Crane's metaphor to his own critical purposes that I want my students to see. It is also the way Berryman reads, the way he focuses his reading on the minuscule, the particular. The whole last paragraph of his essay explicates one word, the final word of Crane's short story: *interpreters*. People as interpreters of nature, of an indifferent universe, of their own fate, dignity and greatness in the face of these things consisting solely in their ability to interpret them. According to Berryman, this is the overarching theme of Crane's short story. This is the meaning the poet attributes to it, his *interpretation* of "The Open Boat":

The experience, and only the experience, of nature's most dangerous and demanding ordeals, fits man to do what it is most his duty and power to do: to explain—explain what nature is, what man is, what matters. The whole story, then, has in some sense been a metaphor, and the ordeal of the boat only an instance of what can happen to man and what it means, what qualities the experience of nature requires. (183)

If we accept Berryman's assertion that a person's highest duty and power consist in *explaining*, then his essay itself may be

seen as a potent — even devout — gesture of his own humanity. Explication as heroism.

As if to bolster this grand claim, the poet ends his “Open Boat” with a quotation from William Faulkner, from Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, a lofty document indeed. “I decline to accept the end of man,” says Faulkner. Quotes Berryman. “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” And then:

‘He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honour and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.’ (183-184)

These are Faulkner’s words. But with them Berryman ends his essay. That is to say, this poet’s essay interpreting another writer’s story — which story, according to the poet, claims that humanity’s greatness lies in its ability to interpret — ends with a quote from a great novelist praising humanity and the interpretative voice of poets. Obviously, Berryman means us to apply Faulkner’s eloquent words to Stephen Crane’s “Open Boat.” But they spill over, so to speak, into our reading of John Berryman’s “Open Boat,” so that we see his act of explicating, of reading, in heroic terms, his written page a fragile dinghy on the turbulent sea of someone else’s text.

It is one measure of the strength of the poet’s presence that, although his essay ends with Faulkner’s speech, it is Berryman’s voice we come away hearing. A voice which is by turns *colloquial* (“Clearly, Crane’s opening sentence, by *not* being about the sky but about — what? well, something else — introduces a complication” [178 — author’s italics]) and *formal* (“the character of the rhythm, being formal, is antithetical to the sentence’s anti-heroic muscular meaning and tone” [178]); a voice which invents words (“the *skyey* expectations of the title” [178 — my italics]) and makes a technically brilliant and rigorous explication of a text read like a personal essay.

A phenomenon I hasten to point out to my students, who for the most part have not read a text like this before. Here is a document in which one writer is so intensely involved in reading another writer's text and is having such a good time writing his own response to it that he bridges the gap between the personal and the analytical. His presence in the page may (and frequently does) anger students, but his rhetorical playfulness and his involvement with his subject also suggest to them hitherto undreamed-of extremes they might go to, entirely new forms of outrage and experiment. (Although, in this context, I am quick to quote them Flannery O'Connor: "It's always wrong of course to say that you can't do this or you can't do that in [writing]. You can do anything you can get away with, but nobody has ever gotten away with much" [76]). Certainly if we wish to teach literary analysis as dialogue, there is no better essay to begin with. I count at least five interlocutors in this text: John Berryman, Stephen Crane, the reader, the hapless academic straw man on page 1, the visionary novelist who has the last word on page 8. But above all it is Berryman's passion in writing about another text that I hope my students will see — and catch, becoming all of them passionate *interpreters*.

But how to get from conception to work?

As Virginia Woolf puts it, in *To the Lighthouse*:

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall staring white. . . . Then beneath the colour there was the shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her hair brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. (31-32).

How do we begin to get our students to dare to play, to speak, in their own prose?

I find it is helpful, after doing a close reading of Didion and Berryman, to look at samples of student papers from the past which have included such playful experimentation.

There follow the openings of three student essays which I frequently discuss in class. Each of these was written to a different

assignment, each on a different short story, each taking a certain risk. The first essay analyzes how the beginning and the ending of Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" work; the second analyzes narrative technique in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter"; the third discusses one of the "indirect means" — in this case, humor — employed by John Cheever in telling "The Fourth Alarm":

(1) Recursion in Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"

When Eudora Welty weaves 'a bright frozen' day in December into the odyssey of an old Negro woman, she takes pains not to assume too much. Her story, 'A Worn Path,' starts off very modestly, nothing striking or unusual: 'It was December. . . .' With this modesty comes a vagueness — December — that tells us little, nothing about the characters, about the plot, the theme, nothing save that it is very cold. But the vagueness does not last long, and we are soon steeped in description thick as Phoenix's thorny bush. This description sticks, at first 'never want[ing] to let us pass,' holding us back with a dash and a colon, then revealing to us a world of love, of dreams, of trials and triumphs. By the end of the second sentence, all we have seen is 'an old Negro woman with her head in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods.' But by the end of the second paragraph, we have seen old Phoenix in the minutest detail, scrutinized her as if she were under the microscope. And by the end of the sixth paragraph, we are ready to join Phoenix on her odyssey. Welty, in the beginning, starts us out on the 'worn path,' grabbing our attention and piquing our interest all the while by painting a colorful picture of an old, old woman.

But the ending is very different: six short sentences in two paragraphs instead of seven long paragraphs in just under a page. In the ending, the real power over the reader lies not in the sweet flow of words, but in stopping that flow and reversing it. Doing this, Welty captures the essence of the Phoenix constantly hinted at in the story: recursion. . .

(2) Changing Channels

Sometimes people get all emotional
And sometimes they don't act rational
You know, man, they just think they're on TV

—Lou Reed, “Street Hassle”

In Robert Coover's short story 'The Babysitter' a great many things happen — perhaps. The reader sees rape, murder, spankings, nudity, fistfights, voyeurism, a drunken crowd covered with butter trying to stuff a fat woman into her girdle, and a pretty babysitter taking a bath. These events, none longer than a paragraph, occur over and over, each time a little differently, until truth blurs into fantasy, and any notions of right and wrong are arbitrary. The narrative dances from one point of view to another, never resting or focusing on one train of thought. There are too many false endings for us to put our faith in any of them, and most of the endings are directly opposed to each other. And all the while, the television blares from its spot in the living room.

What is the reader to make of this orgy of narrative? Coover's narrator not only sees into the minds of his characters, but also allows them to indulge in their fantasies; all of the scenes here are presented as reality, and the characters are reborn as many times as necessary, ready for a new episode, like Wile E. Coyote or the old-time TV bad guys. In fact, Coover presents this story as if it were a TV show, with quick cuts between scenes and emphasis on action rather than feelings. The reader becomes accustomed to the irrationality and violence of this story, much as the audience of a TV adventure show gets used to the gratuitous sex and violence they see. Coover employs this television-style narrative device to emphasize the American obsession with television-style life, where reality takes a back seat to fantasy and morals are so much excess baggage. . . .

(3) The Use of Humor in “The Fourth Alarm”: Is This Guy Serious?

‘The Fourth Alarm’ is really not a very funny story. The protagonists are pathetic and the story is a satire. However, the bitterness of the satire is coated with humor. From the very first, the narrator’s deadpan storytelling makes us laugh. We can see him, stretched out in a lawn chair in the autumn sun, a glass of gin in his hand. ‘It is ten in the morning. Sunday. Mrs. Uxbridge is off somewhere with the children,’ so we are alone with him. He turns to us and informs us that ‘in order to see anything — a leaf or a blade of grass — you have, I think, to know the keenness of love. Mrs. Uxbridge is sixty-three, my wife is away, and Mrs. Smithsonian . . . is rarely in the mood these days, so I seem to miss some part of the morning as if the hour has a threshold or a series of thresholds that I cannot cross.’ Without cracking a smile, he adds: ‘Passing a football might do it.’

However, the story’s humor does not serve just to make the satire more palatable. The narrator’s addition of the football to his poetic speculation on love is the first example of a technique used throughout the story: the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous elements (the mundane and the poetic, the sentimental and the carnal, the ridiculous and the pitiable). The entire plot itself is, in fact, just such a juxtaposition: that of traditional, middle class life and exotic New York theater.

The initial juxtaposition of the football serves both to set the tone and to introduce several themes of the story. This story is about love — and sex — and this story is a satire of love and sex. This story is about a man with a middle class life and middle class values. Love, or sex, or passing a football; they all fit nicely into his framework of ‘what to do on a Sunday morning when the leaves are falling.’ This man thrives on nostalgia — a yearning for the time when everything fit into his framework of traditional middle class life. The very title of the story is drawn from his ‘nostalgia for the innocent movie theaters of [his] youth’ and for his favorite movie, *The Fourth Alarm*, which itself is ‘about the substitution of automobiles for horse-drawn fire engines.’

Nostalgia is the narrator's daily recourse, now. His life no longer fits the traditional scheme he wants it to fit: it has been disrupted by the rebellion of his wife, Bertha.

Oh, yes, Bertha. The narrator refills his glass and returns.
About Bertha. . .

When I read these essay openings by former students with current students, they immediately see that they need not be John Berryman or Joan Didion to play in the page, to struggle *pleasurably* with the making of meaning. Each of these essay openings has its own voice — taken in part from the story it is discussing and in part from the discussant himself or herself. The titles of all three are arresting and quirky; the authors all develop metaphors in their own prose; they play with tone, and, in counterpoint to their own voice, they allow the texts they are analyzing to speak, by direct quote or specific summary, so that we have the impression of a dialogue, the student interrogating the story, getting answers, answering these. Risks are run by these student authors, and mistakes get made: mixed metaphors in the first (“steeped in description thick as Phoenix’s thorny bush”), too many quotes in the third. But how far removed these pages are from the generic, vague, polysyllabic, pallid, boring essays my students initially feel called-upon to write (e.g., “The opening passage of John Cheever’s ‘The Fourth Alarm’ is the preamble to a document of the collapse of a marriage and the loss of a man’s control over his life. . .” And worse.)

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the successful student openings, particularly the first two, is their reference to things beyond the immediate universe of the story they are dealing with. The student who analyzes Welty not only connects her heroine with the mythical Phoenix, but also chooses as the figure for his analysis a term from computers, “recursion,” which he goes on to develop beautifully in the course of his essay. The student writing on Coover begins with lyrics from a song his generation knows, sees the “The Babysitter” is about a world dominated by television (presumably, his own) and culls metaphors from his knowledge of that medium (most notably, Wile E. Coyote) to illuminate his reading of the short story. I think it’s useful to point this out to students, especially in this era when they have read so little, when they have a such a paucity of *literary* texts to draw on in their writing; it is useful to show them that, even so, they

possess worlds of their own that may fruitfully be brought to bear on what they are reading and writing, worlds that most certainly influence the timbre of their own voices.

Which brings us full circle: back to the intersection of the personal and the critical, two writerly impulses which may be seen to meet as rhetorical play.

But what about the other area of expository writing that our students need to begin to master, the essay of argument and persuasion? Are the notions of rhetorical play, of the essay as dialogue and writing as exploration relevant to this genre?

Let us look at Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail": how does it compare to the two other professional essays we have read in such snail-like fashion in the foregoing pages?

If we place it beside John Berryman's analytical essay, we see that both are written responses to someone else's written text. Both participate in spirited dialogue—King's, in fact, more obviously than Berryman's.

For what elicits King's essay is no short story by Stephen Crane. It is, rather, a published statement by eight white clergymen condemning his nonviolent campaign to end segregation in Birmingham. No need for intricate reading here, no metaphors to be (passionately) interpreted. The prison King composes his letter in is highly unmetaphorical.

Except: can this consummate stylist *not* have felt — at least, after the fact — the metaphorical weight of the conditions under which this document about freedom was composed (written in the margins of a newspaper, in a jail cell, by a black man, a prophet of the civil rights movement, in the depths of the deep South)? Certainly, when King explicitly identifies himself with Saint Paul, he is claiming the legitimacy of the "rhetorical tradition" his letter is composed in (Jacobus, 182). "[J]ust as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town" (184), he writes. The subtext: And like Paul, I am compelled to write this epistle in captivity.

King is a consummate stylist. He has that in common with Berryman. And with Joan Didion. His essay is as splendidly written as theirs. But what about the writerly (and readerly) concerns that drive "Why I Write" and "The Open Boat," what about writing

as exploration and rhetorical play? Can we in any sense claim that "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is a "fiction"?

King's text is a nearly perfect example of classical argument, and in so far as this is so it seems less exploratory, less experimental than the Didion and Berryman texts. But in it narrative reigns. In it, King tells us his story and the stories of his race. Grounded in faith and certitude, he is absolutely clear as to why he is writing this letter, engaging in this dialogue: "since I feel that you are men of good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms" (184). From the very outset, King projects unshakeable certainty as to what must be said, his only problem how best to say it. This is not an author in search of a thesis; he is not exploring the foreign territory of the (writer's) self in search of definition, nor exploring someone else's text in order to interpret it. Rather, the search he conducts is of his own experience and the experience of his people for stories that will illuminate black suffering, that will persuade. Narrative as argument. He searches history for "creative extremists" (195) from the past — of any color — whom he can claim as his brothers, his predecessors. And he searches for ways to *tell* us, for the rhetorical tools that will take what he knows in his bones and make of that mute knowledge an articulate and luminous human utterance. It is as though his text had been delivered to him whole and now has only to be put before us in the most brilliant and convincing way possible; the thesis of that text is that the waiting is over, the time is *now*, "oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever" (193). If this letter issues from a jail cell, that is because the time has finally come for the just man to break those unjust laws which would deny the black people their freedom. And on another level: the time has come for the black man to articulate his witness from within the prison of his oppression.

King's sense of conviction is of course crucial to his purposes, and it dictates and is strengthened by the classic Aristotelian order in which he casts the text. We can point out this order to our students and show them how the author uses the *topoi*, especially testimony, to give credence to his arguments. But after we've done a formal analysis of the essay as a whole, calling everything by its ancient name, there still remains King's remarkable voice. How to fathom it? Transparent, lucid, dispassionate, moving, a

voice to convince, comfort the uncomforted, inspire and give courage to those who already share the writer's passion for freedom and brotherhood.

I have found that the most effective way of *hearing* this voice with my students is to have them explicate one or two of his richest passages.

Here is an exemplary paragraph for explication:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to a public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking, 'Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?'; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'white' and 'colored', when you first name becomes 'nigger,' your middle name becomes 'boy' (however old you are) and your last name becomes 'John,' and your wife and mother are never given the respected title 'Mrs.'; when you are harried by day and haunted by night

by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued by inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. (187-188)

Because students are as moved and astonished by this prose as they can be, there is no better paragraph to read them in depth, our question being always: how did he do that, how did he make me feel that way, and how did he wish (maybe) to make his original readers feel? I have found that leading students through an oral explication in class, then asking them to write their own stylistic pastiche of these lines, then finally assigning them a written explication of another paragraph from the same essay begins to give them access to — an actual feel for — Martin Luther King's rhetorical brilliance. Which to many of them is extremely intimidating at first. But less so, once they have actually experimented with it, hands-on, and have felt by working with it how concrete his writing is, how it bristles with stories, how pervasive are his repetitions and stylistic figures, how extraordinarily subtle the modulations in his tone.

There follows the explication I try to elicit from my students in class.

This is the fourteenth paragraph of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It climaxes King's discussion of the circumstances leading up to the current demonstrations, and it leads into subsequent discussion of just and unjust laws. The paragraph consists of six sentences, five of them brief and to the point. But the principal sentence (#4) is 300 words long.

"We have waited," King begins, "for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights." *Waiting* is the most important verb in King's essay, it is what the whole essay is about, and it opens and dominates this whole paragraph. *Waiting*, and *waiting no more*. We the Negro people (he says) have been waiting more than three centuries to be granted what we already possess, under the Constitution and under God. Other colonized peoples are winning their freedom at 20th century speeds ("jetlike"), while

we still belong to the 19th century: “we creep at horse-and-buggy pace.” And what we creep toward is a cup of coffee. And even that is denied us. In this second sentence, we can see a characteristic use of parallelism (“the nations of Asia and Africa” / “we”), repetition (“gaining political independence”/“gaining a cup of coffee”), antithesis (our reality versus theirs), metaphor (“jetlike speed,” “horse-and-buggy pace”), and metonymy: that prohibited cup of coffee which embodies freedom and which will find its echo at the very end of the paragraph when the author’s “cup of endurance runs over,” both of these cups recalling, bitterly, ironically, the biblical cup that runneth over, but with joyful plenitude.

King’s brief third sentence reads as follows: “Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say ‘Wait.’” We note instantly the vivid metaphor (“stinging darts”) and the repetition of the essay’s central verb. But it is in fact *we* who must wait — three hundred words — for King’s stunningly understated response: “we find it difficult to wait.” Note that “difficult” counterbalances “easy,” as “we” counterbalances “those who have never felt. . .”

Martin Luther King never loses his balance.

Certainly not in his spectacular fourth sentence — whose beauty, as I’ve suggested, is that it forces the reader to do what blacks have been doing for more than 340 years. It makes us wait. It goes on and on and on, from one stinging dart of segregation to the next, holding us in suspension with a series of semicolons, never-ending, interminable, never giving us the time to breathe and recover, mimicking in this the situation it describes, its vivid rhythmic prose carrying us inevitably toward the climax, toward the final phrase, toward the final word of the final phrase: “—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

Anaphora structures the sentence — that is, the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses: “But when you have seen. . . ; when you have seen. . . ; when you see. . . ; when you suddenly find. . . ; and see. . . and see. . . and see. . . ; when you have to concoct. . . ; when you take. . . ; when you are. . . ; when your first name becomes. . . ; when you are. . . ; and are. . . ; when you are. . . —then you will understand. . .” We note the change in pronouns that has occurred between sentences 3 and 4, the “you” directly involving us. And

we note too the repetition of the verb “to see.” But what is it you see, if you stand in the writer’s shoes, what is it you are forced to witness? The destruction of your family. Destruction both physical and psychological, family both literal and figurative. Lynch mobs, drownings, beatings of “your mothers and fathers,” “your sisters and brothers”; poverty smothering your “Negro brothers”; misery and nascent inferiority and bitterness taking root in “your six-year-old daughter”; bewilderment and hurt in “your five-year-old son”; the never-ceasing humiliation and intimidation of your wife, your mother, yourself.

King’s use of detail, specific incident and concrete example intensifies our experience of this passage, as do his metaphors throughout (poverty is an “airtight cage,” your little girl’s tears become “ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky,” black people must live “constantly at tiptoe stance”). And further intensifying the metaphorical power of this preacher’s prose are his wonderful rhythms and repetitions, and his use of parallelism, antithesis, alliteration (“curse, kick and even kill”), assonance (“at will and at whim”), onomatopoeia (“your tongue twisted and your speech stammering”), antonomasia (“when your first name becomes ‘nigger,’ your middle name becomes ‘boy’ [however old you are] and your last name becomes ‘John’, and your wife and mother are never given the respected title of ‘Mrs’”). . . .

When we reach the penultimate sentence of the paragraph, we are his: “There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair.” I’ve already commented on *my cup of endurance runneth over*. We cannot fail to hear the biblical resonance of the phrase, nor to see how the bounty and peacefulness of the Twenty-third Psalm have been supplanted by deprivation and want in this society which jails the black man who orders a cup of coffee at a white lunch counter. The metaphorical phrase “the abyss of despair” does not strike us as unwarranted hyperbole, for we have just been taken there. And by juxtaposing this deeply emotional metaphor with his bland and understated final sentence, King underlines the elliptical restraint of that sentence and its powerful irony: “I hope, sirs,” he writes, “you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.”

The final word of this paragraph about how the oppressed

must come to the end of waiting is *impatience*. But the voice that pronounces it speaks (seemingly) with patient, calm lucidity and with the conviction that the “men of good will” to whom this letter is addressed will be unable not to see the legitimacy and unavoidability of his position. He will go on in the rest of his essay to discuss the necessity the just man feels for breaking unjust laws, and he will express his “disappointment” with the white moderates and, most especially, the white clergy who have not yet joined the fight for brotherhood and freedom. The serious rhetorical play so wonderfully in evidence in this long paragraph will recur throughout King’s text, where it will continue to move and illuminate us.

When students read “Letter from Birmingham Jail” this closely, what amazes them in particular is the splendid confluence in its pages of the personal and the classical, of rhetorical devices with Greek names and intimate human feeling. How did he do that?! they ask, dazzled by the essay’s formal perfection and by the unobtrusiveness of this formal perfection, which is rendered virtually invisible by the immediacy of the writer’s voice. King is a wonderful *storyteller*. Preacher, magician, so present is he in the page, so fully turned toward us, that we are never aware of his rhetorical tricks, his Aristotelian structures — until we step back from them, in the classroom, and ask ourselves how this text, how the author of this text has managed to move us so.

To ask this question — *how did he do that?* — is to enter into a dialogue with Martin Luther King’s rhetoric itself, and if students are then given the chance to imitate and analyze the master, to write *like* and *about* him, they will find their own voices modulating, enriched by his. They will begin, however tentatively, to pick up his tools.

“Writing is the act of saying I,” writes Didion, “of imposing oneself on other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.*”

Her definition would seem to apply even more to “Letter from Birmingham Jail” than to her own text. Although even in speaking of Martin Luther King, I myself would define writing less combatively than Didion does. King is not interested in bludgeoning us, he has no sympathy for police dogs and fire hoses, but wishes to persuade us by appealing to our sense of reason, justice and humanity. His letter is a loving, if angry, document. I would define

writing less as warfare than as seduction. But whatever degree of militancy we assign to this activity, it must be clear from a reading of these three professional essays that their writers want above all to buttonhole their reader and take her or him along, unresisting, into the page, into the universe of the page. And the only means of transport available is the writer's voice. There's a person speaking to us in the pages we have read, and enjoying that speaking, and compelling us to listen. It is this sense of the essay as a living document, a story narrated to us, a dialogue, a human presence at play in the page, which calls upon its readers to interact with it, that I want to teach my students. So that they may go out there — or, more exactly, go *in* there — and talk to us. Talk to us!

Nancy Kline, currently on leave from Harvard University where she is Head Preceptor in Expository Writing, is Visiting Assistant Professor of French at Barnard College. Her publications include *The Faithful*, a novel; *Lighting: The Poetry of Rene Char* and the *Tongue Snatches*, a translation of Claudine Herrmann's *Les Voleuses de langue*. She is currently editing a collection of essays entitled *How Writers Teach Writing*, forthcoming from Prentice Hall.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Editions du Seuil, 1973.
- Berryman, John. "The Open Boat." *The Freedom of the Poet*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976. 176-184.
- Cibual, Matt. "Changing Channels." Unpublished paper. April 5, 1985.
- Didion, Joan. "Why I Write." In *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. Janet Sternburg. Norton, 1980. 17-25.
- Hunt, Julianne. "The Use of Humor in 'The Fourth Alarm': Is This Guy Serious?" Unpublished paper. December, 1986.
- Jacobus, Lee A. *A World of Ideas*. Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 1983. 181-183.
- King, Martin Luther. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In *A World of Ideas*, ed. Lee A. Jacobus. Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 1983. 183-199.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979. 63-86.
- Ozick, Cynthia, *Metaphor & Memory*. Knopf, 1989.
- Pearlman, Joel. "Recursion in Eudoria Welty's 'A Worn Path'." Unpublished paper. April 9, 1984.
- Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955.

